

Enrichment by terminallybored

Series: [Mermaids Are Assholes \[2\]](#)

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Summary:

Applying for college is Steve's second least favorite thing in the world. His first least favorite is still dealing with the world's only known mermaid.

Enrichment

Author's Note:

Since I took a shameful amount of time to reply to the lovely comments on Bait, I humbly offer you more Mermaid!Billy as recompense.

Another week, another rejection letter. Steve drops his head back against the headrest of his car. Rejection letter and envelope alike crunch in his fist as the frustration hits him. Feels like he should be used to this by now, right? This is the fifth one, how can it still be this hard to hear that he's too dumb for yet another college?

Doing this shit right before work is a bad idea. Now the last thing he wants to do is go deal with the aquarium crowds and the kids who start going feral when the aquarium-exclusive Penguin Punch flavor runs out for the day and the offer of chocolate or Rocky Road becomes a high offense.

It's a lucky thing Steve likes his co-worker and doesn't want to leave Robin high and dry for their shifts or he'd have been fired for not showing up a long time ago. He sighs and shoves his hat on before opening his car door.

It's 4 hours in when Owens comes striding towards the stand. Striding with purpose because he definitely wants something, and it's really not the day for it.

"No," Steve says flatly as soon as the guy is within hearing distance. The Penguin Punch ran out two hours ago because of a field trip. Some kid's dolphin-shaped balloon popped while he was in line for ice cream and he started crying so hard that he puked all over Steve's shoes. Steve just wants to survive his last hour and go home and maybe drink heavily.

"Harrington." Owens' voice is tight and he looks like he's having the same kind of day as Steve. "Don't be difficult."

“Get one of your actual staff to deal with him.” Steve is sure Owens has tried. It would probably make his life easier if someone on his crew, whom he could boss around freely, could deal with their goddamn mermaid. But he’s still not in the mood for this to be his problem today.

Owens plants his hands on top of the ice cream stand and leans on it heavily, leveling a glare at Steve. Steve glares right back at him.

“I understand you’re not doing very well getting into college.”

Steve balks and loses the staring contest they’re having. “What? How did y—“

“I know things,” Owens says, holding up a hand in the universal ‘stop talking’ sign. Steve does not stop talking because what the hell? Also, authority doesn’t intimidate him because he’s young enough to feel invincible and old enough to be depressed about his future prospects.

“Seriously, are you going through my mail? Did someone raid my car as soon as I came in??”

“Do you have another one in your car?” Owens tuts and shakes his head. “That makes it... what? Four now?”

“Five.”

“Hm. So then, let’s negotiate.”

The air in Steve’s ‘my privacy has been violated’ balloon leaks out at an alarming rate. “What?”

“You help me out with Billy and I’ll put in a good word for you with an admissions board,” Owens says. He raises his eyebrows. “Deal?”

Steve’s dignity is 100% for sale, and he’s only a little ashamed of how quickly he agrees.

It’s only when Steve has finished helping Robin shut the stand down and is heading to the lab that he realizes he never actually asked Owens what he needs help with. He hopes he’s not gonna have to

carry Billy's heavy ass down the utility stairs again, but if it helps him get into college, fuck, he'll carry him up or down as many stairs as he has to. It does occur to him that this is not the best attitude to have for his own self-preservation, but whatever. Five rejection letters in under two months will do that to a guy.

The sun is starting to set and the aquarium crowds are waning as Steve passes through them. Everyone is drifting towards the exits, and he's eventually walking alone through the back of the park. The giant laboratory building looms overhead and casts the walkway in shadows as Steve approaches the metal door and looks at the camera. The door buzzes and the heavy lock thunks as it slides free.

"Harrington!" Owens calls, waving to him from across the lab. "Over here!"

Steve blinks and looks to the left where he knows Billy's tank is, the way he usually goes. But Owens waves again, in a definite come-hither motion, so Steve obliges and crosses the lab to join him.

"Hey, is my car gonna be okay in the parking lot if the aquarium is closing?" he asks.

"That's fine. In here." Owens catches his arm and pulls him into the back, into a locker room. It's a disconcerting box with the same gray tiles on the floor and the walls all the way up to the ceiling. The warm, salty air makes his hair almost immediately start to sag. Owens hands him a blue wetsuit that was left sitting over one of the benches mounted in the ground. "Put this on."

Steve looks at the heavy suit that's thrust into his hands. "Uh... why? It's not that big of a deal to just wash my uniform if Billy is being a dick."

Owens is already rummaging in a locker that seems to just be a dumping ground for spare equipment. "You're getting in the tank with him. The water is cold. Put on the suit."

Steve opens his mouth to say something. Can't decide what and closes it again. Opens it. "...in the tank. With the mermaid."

"In the tank," Owens agrees. "He's been listless the past few days and he needs some enrichment. Even his scales are turning dull." He claps Steve on the back as he heads out. "See you out on the floor, Harrington."

Steve is left holding a wet suit, a pair of flippers, and a mask. "Wait, doesn't enrichment mean like... giving them toys?" he calls. Owens shuts the door to the changing room without answering.

Great. Steve is the toy.

Steve tugs fruitlessly at the wetsuit that wants to claw its way into his ass crack. It's just a little too short for someone with his legs. He checks the armful of equipment he got handed as soon as he stepped out of the dressing room. He's got his flippers and mask, a rubber ball that he doesn't think Billy's going to play with, and a knob of something stiff and light that feels like pumice. He has a very vague idea of what to do with any given item, which is good enough. Trying to get direct answers out of anyone at this lab seems pretty fruitless, so he'll take his chances figuring it out.

The soaring ceiling of the lab feels so much higher when he knows he's going to be getting into the tank that's nearly the full height of the room. As soon as his bare feet hit the cold ground of the lab floor, there's a flash of red in his periphery. Steve doesn't look because Billy just plain does better if he doesn't get Steve's direct attention too quickly. His ego doesn't need that. He just heads for the industrial staircase locked into position beside the tank and starts climbing it. Billy isn't following behind him this time. He's right beside him, keeping pace with him right until Steve is nearly at the top of the stairs. Then he swims off ahead and pops his head up and over the side of the tank, looking down at Steve.

"Whatcha wearin', pretty boy?" he calls. As if he doesn't know exactly what Steve is wearing or what it means. Steve wipes the water off his face where Billy's hair is dripping on him.

"What do you think I'm wearing?" Steve dumps his stuff on the top platform and sits on the top step, grabbing one of the flippers.

“Looks good on you. Neoprene hugs your ass.” Billy grins, displaying his sharp teeth.

“It hugs everything. That’s what it’s made for,” Steve says, flexing one ankle to make sure the flipper is secure.

“Well, I don’t give a shit what it does to your knees.” Billy grabs the ball that rolls away when Steve grabs the other flipper. He tosses it from hand to hand. “Man, these assholes are really short on ideas. This is one step up from the floating soda bottles they use for the seals.”

“If you just talked to them, they’d probably bring you whatever you wanted.” Steve sighs as Billy throws the ball across the lab. It smacks into the far wall hard and the sound of it bursting echoes across the room. That wall is... pretty goddamn far away. Steve decides not to think too hard about how much strength had to be in that throw for that to happen. “You could have just said you didn’t want to play with the ball.”

“I don’t wanna play with the ball,” Billy says, grinning like he’s hilarious.

“Yeah, no shit.” Steve grabs his mask and shifts to the edge of the tank, dipping his legs in. He’s not letting Billy intimidate him and Owens would have told him if there was some danger in his intruding on Billy’s tank, right? Well. Assuming anyone else has ever gotten into the tank with him.

Steve decides, again, that he’s just not going to think about it that hard. He needs to get into college or he’s going to work at the aquarium ice cream stand forever, in which case he might as well be dead. Murdered by a mermaid is at least an interesting way to go. And if Billy kills him his death will make Owens’ life hell for a while.

The water is fucking cold, biting into the inch of ankle left bare by the too-small suit. Billy loses his patience and submerges while Steve is coaxing the band of the mask over his hair. The only warning is the feeling of strong fingers closing around his ankle right before he’s yanked off the platform and into the middle of the tank. Steve coughs, spitting out the mouthful of saltwater he got, but he stays

afloat. The mask drifts down into the tank and will probably end up wherever all of Steve's stolen Scoops Ahoy hats live now. Billy doesn't actually pull him under the water, though. He just swims around him now that he has room. His powerful red tail flexes slow and effortless, propelling Billy backward in a lazy loop. Steve notes that Owens wasn't wrong that Billy's scales are looking dull. He's used to the overhead lights bouncing off those scales like tiny mirrors, but today there's just a sort of muddled, halfhearted sheen to them.

"So what do mermaids do for fun, since you apparently hate toys?" Steve asks, kicking his legs and letting himself drift toward the far edge of the tank. Billy moves along with him, using his tail to push Steve back toward the middle of the tank when he gets too close to the wall.

"We like chasing games. Which you would suck at because you're human and slow," Billy hums.

"Great. Try telling me something mermaids do for fun that humans can do." Steve kicks out a leg and shoves at Billy's tail with a flipper. It's pure muscle and he doesn't even manage to interrupt Billy's circling. All he manages is to get his ankle caught up when Billy grabs it and takes off across the tank, dragging Steve behind him as he circles the edge of the tank. Steve is a seasoned enough swimmer than he knows to keep his face above water at all costs and only flails a little bit.

"Not impressed," he calls over the rush of water beside his ears. "So what if you can swim fast? You live in the water. Are you impressed by my ability to climb stairs?"

Billy releases him abruptly and twists around bringing his tail fin down on Steve's chest, knocking the wind out of him and forcing him to stay floating on his back in the water.

"I mean, it does make your ass look good when you do it," he taunts, pressing down with his tail just enough to make Steve bob in the water until it splashes on his face. Steve coughs and tries to move the fin off him but he's got nothing solid under him for leverage. Which Billy knows and he's just being a dick about it.

Steve should know better than to get into a pissing match with a mermaid while he's in a tank of water. He should. But Billy reminds him a little of Tommy after they had their falling out, where he was always an asshole, always in Steve's face, and the only way to get through to him was to dish it right back. So Steve grabs the edge of the webbing on Billy's tail and gives it a solid yank.

Either Billy really doesn't expect it or it hurts more than Steve figured anything on Billy's brick of a tail could hurt because Billy immediately yanks his tail fin back out of Steve's grasp. And then brings it back. Steve feels it before he registers what's about to happen. The huge swath of cold, sticky webbing slams into his shoulder and the side of his head and he goes flying. He thinks he feels fingers trying to catch him, but nothing stops his momentum, and his head slams into the side of the tank. It snaps back from the hit and Steve sees sparks of light winking in his vision. Up and down swirl together and he's not altogether sure which way to try and swim as the water seems to come from everywhere, getting up his nose and down his throat as he tries to gasp for air. There's water all around him and whichever way he's supposed to be swimming, he's not going that way.

Strong arms lock around his waist and there's a kick of a tail he feels against his legs that propels him upward. He breaks through the surface and gasps for breath. There's already water in his mouth and throat that makes him cough and sputter. There's some air, but he can't take a breath in while he's coughing and his watery vision is starting to darken at the edges.

A wet hand catches Steve's jaw and turns his head and he feels Billy's lips come down on his. Before he can try and find Billy's chest to push him away because he needs the opposite of something covering his mouth right now, before his lungs can start to scream... there's air. Kissing Billy is like taking a deep breath and Steve buries his fingers in Billy's curls and hangs onto that kiss for all he's worth. The water is still tickling against his windpipe but he gets another breath. And another.

It's Billy who finally pulls back and props Steve up over the edge of the tank where he begins coughing up the last of the water he swallowed.

“Look at you, taking my breath away,” Billy sighs in a mock-swoon, thumping him on the back. It rattles Steve to the bone but it does help loosen everything up that’s gone down wrong pipes and orifices.

“Asshole,” he croaks, scrubbing a hand over his eyes and blinking the saltwater out of them.

“Harrington! Talk to us!” Owens yells from the floor of the laboratory. Steve stares down blearily and registers three figures down there. Two in diving suits and all of them with long guns that he hopes are tranquilizers. He hurries to wave a hand at them.

“I’m okay!” he calls, coughing and moving around to grab the lip of the tank and shift himself to a spot in front of Billy. “It’s fine! I surprised him, it’s on me!”

The one he assumes is Owens lowers his gun and the other two follow suit. “Are you alright, Harrington?”

“I’m fine,” Steve calls again, folding his arms on the tank and letting his weight float. Really sore, but fine.

“You can exit the tank now.”

Steve waves to show he heard. “I’m just gonna catch my breath.”

The three down below retreat, weapons put away. Steve feels Billy grab his collar and propel him over to the platform on the side of the tank. He hauls himself up onto the side of the tank, ribs still aching from the lack of air and feeling more than a little tossed around. He lays flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling where the rows of lights blur around the edges from the water clinging to his lashes. Breathing kind of hurts at the moment. Everything kind of hurts.

Billy pops up and shoves his knees apart so he can slot himself right in between Steve’s calves as they hang in the water. He folds his arms on Steve’s thighs and rests his chin on them because mermaids apparently don’t have boundaries. Or at the very least Billy doesn’t. Steve is beginning to think Billy is a mermaid anomaly because there cannot possibly be a whole species like this guy that have managed to remain secret and off the radar.

“How you doing, pretty boy?” Billy prods Steve’s stomach, making him wheeze in complaint. Yep, that hurts too. “You’re delicate.”

“Oh, fuck you.” Steve jostles a knee in a way that’s meant to shake Billy off, but he’s not coordinated enough right now for that to work. “You can’t bash my head into something, throw me around your tank, and then act like I’m made of glass when it fucking hurts.”

“You whine like a bitch.” Billy backs off and shoves Steve’s knees closed, also shoving his entire body aside a good few inches. Then he plants his hands on the side of the tank and just boosts himself right out of the water. Flops that giant-ass mermaid tail right down on Steve’s lap, kindly just short of his crotch, and leans his weight back on his elbows.

Steve groans and turns his head to look at Billy. “The fuck, man?”

Billy gestures at his tail. “That’s what they wanted right? Clean up the scales? I’m sure as hell not gonna do it myself.” He grins at Steve, running his tongue over his teeth. “Go on, pretty boy. *Buff* me.”

How Billy can be at his absolute most annoying at the exact moment that he actually sort of cooperates is just... beyond Steve. But he’s not gonna wait for that goodwill to run out. He pauses after grabbing the porous knob they handed him before he got in the tank, and holds it up for inspection.

“Is this okay? Like... it won’t hurt you?”

Billy snatches it and examines it, humming thoughtfully. “Nah. It’s coral. That’s what we usually use.” He drops the block on his lap. “Just follow the direction of the scales and go nuts.”

It’s slow, probably mainly because Steve is worried if he goes too fast he’s gonna do some kind of damage. He’s not going to take for granted that anything on Billy is immune to pain anymore. Brushing the coral in short strokes down along a small patch of Billy’s tail, the dull color begins to muddle with the grime loosening and clinging to the block. Steve cups water from the tank in his hand and drips it over the area where he’s working. Sure enough, the build-up rinses off and reveals a patch of tail with the same vibrant jewel tone in the

scales he saw the first time he met Billy.

Billy makes a pleased rumble in his chest and lowers himself down further, laying flat on his back on the platform. He rests one hand across his stomach and lets the other skim the surface of the water and doesn't bitch while Steve inches his way down, working one small patch at a time. Steve isn't even sure Billy is awake until he shifts himself down once more so that the giant tail fin is in his lap. Billy finally opens his eyes and lifts his head, his hair oddly damp and full where Steve usually only sees it dripping wet.

"Aw, done already?"

"Yeah. Looks good," Steve says, deciding not to mention that he's been at it for what has to be over an hour and his arms are killing him. But man, Billy's tail looks pretty awesome if he does say so himself. "Seems like you enjoy that. Why won't you keep your tail clean on the coral in your tank?"

"Because then you won't do it for me." Billy grins at him and Steve drops his head back, groaning. He hopes Owens doesn't hear that and decide life is easier if he does, indeed, just chase Steve down every time Billy's tail needs work. He tries to push Billy's tail off him only to be reminded, again, that Billy is a solid slab of muscle. So he just pulls his legs up to his chest and scoots backward to free himself.

"You're not fun," Billy grumbles, sitting up once Steve is already free of him. He braces his palms on the platform and slides himself back into the water, flicking his tail once and twisting around under the water. The ache in Steve's arms feels a little less and maybe a little more worth it as Steve admires the way the light bounces off Billy's scales now. All because of him. That's not a bad accomplishment to walk away with.

Steve gets to appreciate his hard work for a solid thirty seconds before the end of Billy's tail pops up and slaps down against the surface of the water, spraying him in cold water and ruining the moment. Soaked again, he flips the bird down at the tank of water. Billy's hand breaks the surface and returns the gesture. Then he's gone, the flash of red disappearing into the thick vegetation at the bottom of the tank. Steve waits it out for a moment but he doesn't

come back. So... he's been dismissed, he guesses.

"Okay, bye," he calls, not sure how well the words will travel down into the water, then gathers his equipment and slowly climbs down the stairs on legs half-asleep from having a mermaid tail squashing them.

It's almost midnight by the time Steve gets to leave. His car is locked in for the night and the front gate security guy is already gone. He has to get a ride home from Owens and stays mad about it for exactly three days. Until he gets a letter with a college seal on the front, larger and heavier than all the others.

Mr. Harrington,

We at the Hawkins University of Science are pleased to offer you a spot in our upcoming fall session. Please plan to attend one of our upcoming new student orientations. We have included a list of dates and times with your paperwork.

Please note that you will not need to select classes during your orientation. We have worked with your mentor to set the appropriate coursework for your degree and we have included a work-life study class in your schedule to continue your internship.

Steve frowns. He's got a really bad feeling settling in as he flips through the other papers from the school he never applied for. Orientation dates. A dorm application. A map of the campus. And a schedule typed out on thick cardstock.

Biology I

Biology I Lab

Marine Science I

Chemistry I

Life Experience Course- Internship: Hawkins Aquarium, Mentor: Dr. Samuel Owens

And that's how Steve learns that he has a new job at the Hawkins Aquarium.